

# How Sumble was done Historically

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In this article, I will explain modern views of sumble. Then I will show passages from the Lore showing how Sumble is portrayed in historical sources. My main sources include **Beowulf lines 489-675**, and **Heimskringla óláfs saga tryggvasonar Chapter 35**, as these are two very long and detailed passages showing how sumble was done historically, and what sumble was about. At the end of this article, I will include my translation of these texts so all can read them. (Another great example of a Yule blot and Sumble is Hakon the Good chapters 15-16, though in some translations it is chapters 13-14.)

"**Sumble**" is the Old Saxon word for "symbol". In the Old English Beowulf it is called "**Symbol.**" **Sumbl** is the Old Icelandic word in Heimskringla. To quote **Swain Wodening** a friend of mine: "The idea behind symbol is to place one's self into the flow of Uurd (Bauschatz pp. 109-110), thus linking deeds of the past to those of the present, and affect those deeds of the future. The speech at Sumble revolves around deeds past and present. Béowulf in the poem stated who his father was and boasted of past deeds prior to vowing to slay Grendel. Boasts serve one purpose, to place oneself in the flow of Uurd, and thereby control the results of future events. Results of events in the future are based upon the results of those in the past. Béowulf's béot or vow ends with Gað a wyrd swá hío sceol "always goeth Uurd as she shall.""

## Sumble Myths

- 1. There should be one drinking horn that everyone uses.** Believe it or not, Sumble in Beowulf, the Heliand, Lokasenna, Hakon the Good's Saga, and Heimskringla do not show a central horn being passed. Multiple cups or steins are mentioned. Everyone can have their own horn or Stein, and it is clear from the sources that each person had their own.
- 2. Sumble order should be circular.** Sumble definitely starts with the host and wife of the host. But Heimskringla and Beowulf clearly show no "circular" order to boasts, toasts, and vows which are done at random, nor does it indicate circular order of one horn. This is what I mean by circular order: The host starts each round and then the "central drinking horn" is passed in a circle until it reaches the host who then will start the next round. Therefore, the entire group is sharing spit. This practice is not in any of the historical texts. Sharing spit is a phrase from Garman Lord and "Theodish Belief", a movement older than Asatru that started in New York, but less known. (I practice Aldsidu).
- 3. You must use a drinking horn.** Steins, drinking bowls (scalon, where we get the word "skal/scal/skoll"), and drinking cups, are cups mentioned in the Heliand (see the Heliand Fitt

24). The Angles and Saxons did have drinking horns, but these were less popular than one would assume. They are only found in the funeral mounds of nobles or high-ranking individuals. It appears common people (most of the people) did not use drinking horns. Most drinking vessels in Beowulf are ale or beer cups. Beer and ale cups also imply that mead was not the only form of alcohol used (see the next myth below.) In the translation of Beowulf below, I made bold certain key words, and then placed the Old English (English) words in parenthesis immediately after the modern Angle (English) word.

**4. Mead is the alcoholic beverage that must be used in Sumble.** In Old Saxon poetry, there are no "mead halls." There are only "wine halls." In Beowulf, there are "mead halls" and "beer halls." As stated above in point 3, beer and ale cups also imply mead is not the only drink option, and "wine halls" and "beer halls" also imply sumble can have multiple forms of drink. The Old Saxons seemed to have preferred wine and cider (alcoholic). The Old Saxon Heliand repeatedly shows the Saxons drinking wine and hard cider. Mead is not mentioned in any surviving Old Saxon text, this doesn't mean that it was unknown to the Saxons however.. The word "ale" is mentioned in Old Saxon texts, quite frequent. Therefore, cider, ales, and wine are perfect for Sumble.

## Sumble Facts

1. **Sumble includes gielps and beots.** A gielp is a boast of one's ancestry or past deed(s). Gielps are followed by a b<sup>eo</sup>t, a boast to do something.
2. **Sumble begins with prayers to the Gods and Goddesses, toasting to the Ancestors, and contains a bragafull "the leader's boast."** In Sumble one is attempting to weave their own Fate or Uurd.
3. **The steins, cups, or horns are symbols of the Well of Uurd.**
4. **The lady of the hall pouring the wine, cider, mead, or other represents the Norns (or to the Saxons: Shapers) watering the Irminsul daily bringing the past back to the present.**
5. **Sumble has positions.** The symbelgifa is the host of the Sumble. This individual sits at the high seat, gives gifts, and recognizes important guests. It is the symbelgifa that gives the bregofull or bragafull. The ealu bora (ale-bearer) is the highest lady of the hall, usually the significant other of the symbelgifa (Sumble giver). She bears the horn to the symbelgifa. She would bear flattering words, and advise the symbelgifa during Sumble. She ensures that the byrele or byreles "cup bearer(s)" do their job. The ealu bora always pours the first stein/cup/horn as she represents Uurd who is female. (Bauschatz, The Well and the Tree,77). The cup bearers are women representing the Norns/Shapers. The þyle advises the symbelgifa and will challenge boasts that he/she feels may go unfulfilled. In the poem Beowulf, Unferþ<sup>b</sup> the þyle challenged Béowulf, questioning his abilities to complete the task he had vowed to do. This challenge is done in the tradition of flying as foolhardy vows/boasts will have negative consequences. Uuoden (Odin) appears as a þyle in the Hávamál verse 80 and 111. A þyle must be someone of great wisdom. The scop recites poetry in song. The ancient tales of

the group call forth the group's collective uurd. The tales sung by the scop serve as a gielp for the group present.

## Sumble Order

Sources: Eric Wodening in his article An Anglo-Saxon Symbol, Steve Pollington in his academic work The Mead-Hall, and Paul Bauchatz's academic work The Well and the Tree. Also Beowulf & Heimskringla.

- 1. Entrance of Guests into the Hall:** The guests enter the hall.
- 2. Seating:** The symbelgifa seats each person. The symbelgifa then takes the position before the high seat.
- 3. Symbelgifa Forespeech:** The symbelgifa opens Sumble with words similar to those from Béowulf lines 489-490: "Sit now to Sumble and unwind your measures, victory hearted heroes."
- 4. Ealu bora Forespeech:** The ealu bora then enters with the horn/stein in hand. She greets those present, and offers the horn/stein to the symbelgifa with words like those in Béowulf lines 1169-1175: "Take this full, my lord drohten, hoard sharer, you be happy, warriors' gold friend, and speak to the Geats with mild words..."
- 5. Bregofull:** The symbelgifa then says bedes (prayers), followed by a minni to the ancestors. (A "minni" is a remembrance toast.) The Bregofull is the boasting of past accomplishments which is included in the minni.
- 6. Gift giving (optional):** The symbelgifa may then give gifts to those present. Beowulf received gifts from Hrothgar during Sumble.
- 7. Léoð (optional):** The scop may then sing a song, either in praise of the gods, the folk, or the symbelgifa.
- 8. Boasting/Toasting/Oathing at Random**
- 9. Closing:** The symbelgifa will close with the final minni to the Ancestors when the random boasting/toasting/ and oathing comes to an end.

**Sumbl in Heimskringla óláfs saga tryggvasonar Chapter 35** King Sveinn held a magnificent sumbl and called to him all of the ruling class that were in his kingdom. He was going to commemorate his father Haraldr. Then there had also died shortly before this Strút-Haraldr on Skáney and Véseti in Borgundarhólmr, father of Búi digri and Sigurðr. The king then sent word to the Jómsvikings that Jarl Sigvaldi and Búi and their brothers should come there and commemorate their fathers at sumbl that the king was holding. The Jómsvikings went to the sumbl with all the most valiant of their men. They had forty ships from Vinðland and twenty ships from Skáney. There assembled there a very large number of men. The first day at sumbl, before King Sveinn was to go up into his father's high-seat, he drank his toast and made a vow that before three winters had passed he would have come with his army to England and have killed King Aðalráðr or driven him from the country. Everyone who was at sumbl had to drink

that toast. Then the leaders of the Jómsvikings were served the largest **horns (PLURAL)** with the strongest drink that was there. And when that toast had been drunk, then everyone had to drink Christ's toast (***Robert Sass adds: "sigh..." Clearly this is a post Christianization saga***), and the Jómsvikings were always given the fullest and strongest drinks. The third one was Mikjáll's toast, and everyone drank that. And after that Jarl Sigvaldi drank his father's toast and afterwards made a vow that before three winters were passed, he would have come to Norway and killed Jarl Hákon or driven him from the country. Then his brother Þorkell hávi made a vow that he would go with Sigvaldi to Norway and not flee from battle if Sigvaldi was still fighting there. Then Búi digri made a vow that he would go to Norway with them and not flee before Jarl Hákon. Then his brother Sigurðr made a vow that he would go to Norway and not flee while a majority of the Jómsvikings were fighting. Then Vagn Ákason made a vow that he would go with them to Norway and not come back before he had killed Þorkell leira (Mudflat) and gone to bed with his daughter Ingibjørg. Many other leaders made vows to do various things. People drank the memorials that day but the following morning, when the Jómsvikings were sober, they felt they had said plenty and hold their discussions and make deliberations as to how they are to arrange the expedition, deciding at length to get ready then as quickly as possible, fitting out their ships and troops. This was very widely talked of round many countries.

**Symbol in Beowulf verses 489-675:** Then at morning-time this mead-hall (**medoheal**), this retainer-hall, was covered in blood, when the day shone, every bench-plank wetted with blood, the hall with sword-blood; I had the fewer loyal ones, dear retainers, by those whom death had taken away. Sit now at the banquet and disclose your thoughts, victory triumph to the men, as your mind prompts you." Then for the Geat-men, all together, a bench was cleared in the beer-hall (**bëorsele**); there the strong-hearted ones went to sit, proud in strength. A servant carried out his office, who bore in his hands a decorated ale-cup, poured out the shiny sweet drink. Sometimes the scop sang, clear-voiced, in Heorot. There was joy of the heroes, no small company of Danes and Weathers. Unferth spoke, Ecglaf's son, who sat at the feet of the Scyldings' lord, loosened a battle-rune; Beowulf's journey, the brave-seafarer's, was great vexation to him, since he did not wish that any other man in middle-earth should ever care more about glory under the heavens than he himself: "Are you that Beowulf who competed with Breca, contended at swimming in the wide sea, where the two of you tempted the sea out of pride, and for foolish boast risked your lives in deep water? Nor could anybody, friend or enemy, dissuade you two from the sorrowful journey, when you two went on the sea. There you two covered the sea-stream with your arms, traversed the sea-roads, moved quickly with your hands, glided over the sea; the sea surged with waves, with winter's surges. In the water's power you two labored seven nights; he overcame you at swimming, had greater strength. Then, at morning-time, the sea carried him up to the Heathoræmas; from there he, beloved to his people, went to his own dear homeland, the Brondings' country, the fair

refuge**stronghold**, where he had people, stronghold and arm-rings (**bëagas**). All the promise against you Beanstan's son truly carried out. Therefore, I expect the outcome will be worse for you, even if you had prevailed in every battle-rush, grim war, if you dare wait for Grendel nearby for a night-long time." Beowulf said, Ecgtheow's son: "Listen! A great many things, my friend Unferth, have you told, drunk with beer (**bëore**), about Breca, said about his journey. I claim as truth that I had more sea-strength, difficulty in the waves, than any other man. We said it, when we were boys, and vowed – both of us were heart were as battle-grim as you yourself claim. But he has found out that he need not dread strongly the feud, terrible sword-storm of your people, Victory-Scyldings; takes toll by force, spares none of the people of the Danes (**Deniga**), but he feels joy, kills and puts to death, does not expect war from the Spear-Danes. But I will quickly now offer him the Geats' strength and power in battle. Then he who may shall courageously go to mead (**medo**), after the morning-light, of another day, the radiance-wearing sun, shines from the south over the children of men." Then the giver of treasure was joyful, grey-haired and war-famous; he believed in help, prince of the Bright-Danes, heard from Beowulf, people's shepherd, the firmly-resolved thought. There was heroes' laughter, noise sounded forth, words were joyful. Wealhtheow came forward, Hrothgar's queen, mindful of proper behavior, greeted, gold-adorned, the men in the hall (**healle**), and the noble woman gave the cup first to the East-Danes' homeland-guardian, bade him be joyful at the beer-drinking **bëorþege**), beloved to his people. He enjoyed gladly the feast and the hall-cup (**symbol ond seleful**), victory-famous king. Then the Helmings' lady went around to every part of the hall, old and young warriors, offered the treasure-vessel, until the time came that she brought Beowulf, arm-ring-adorned (**bëaghroden**) queen, determined in her heart, the mead-cup (**medoful**); she greeted the leader of the Geats, thanked God, wise, in words because her desire had been fulfilled, that she might believe in a hero as help against the crimes. He received the cup, the battle-fierce warrior, from Wealhtheow, and then spoke, ready for battle; Beowulf said, Ecgtheow's son: "I intended, when I went to sea, went into the sea-boat with my men's company, that I would certainly carry out your people's will or die in battle fast in enemy-grips. I will show a warrior's might, or await my end-day in this mead-hall." Those words pleased the woman well, the Geat's boast-speech (**gilpcwide**); gold-adorned she went, noble people-queen, to sit with her lord. Then again, as before, bravery-words were spoken within the hall, people were glad, the noise of the victory-people, until presently Healfdene's son wanted to seek his evening-rest; he knew that against the monster battle in the high-hall (**hëahsele**) had been planned, from the time they could see the light of the sun until darkening night was over everything, when the creatures came walking under shadow-protections, dark under the clouds. All the troop got up. One man greeted then the other, Hrothgar Beowulf, and wished him success, power over the wine-hall (**wïnærnes**), and spoke that word: "Never before have I entrusted to any man, since I could lift hand and shield, the strength-hall of the Danes, except now to you. Take now and guard the best of houses, be mindful of glory, show the mighty strength, keep watch against the enemy. You will not lack

what you want, if you come through this courage-deed with your life." Then Hrothgar went, with his warriors' company, the Scylding's protector, out of the hall; the war-chief wanted to go to Wealtheow, the queen, his consort. Glory's King had set a hall-guard against Grendel, as people had heard; he fulfilled special office for the Dane's lord, kept giant-watch.

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### **Sumble in the Old Saxon Heliand:**

